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ABSTRACT

The notion of national unity through a single official language is defended by policy makers, who point out the practical and financial drawbacks involved in teaching in the vernacular in multilingual nations. Findings from grassroots-level case studies in Senegal, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Malawi, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka attest to the complexity of the participants' perceptions and desires. Additional comparative data from other countries echo these studies and underscore the recurring themes of usefulness and social advancement on the one hand, and national unity and progress on the other. A colossal gap exists between what theorists proclaim as ideal, and the real-life empirical world of schools in very poor multilingual countries. Practical problems of teaching in the mother tongue are those of alphabet, transcriptions, phonetics, paucity of vocabulary, lack of resources for programs and trained teachers, and a shortage of textbooks and other printed matter in the new literate languages. The diverse case studies tend to show that parents and pupils are satisfied with school instruction being in a dominant language if they see that dominant language as a possible vehicle for social advancement. The Zimbabwe model seems to work for many rural schools: basic literacy in the first three grades in the native language, especially if there is printed reading material available. When the numerous variables and viewpoints are considered, "usefulness" emerges as the most important factor in predicting whether a choice of literacy instruction medium will be successful. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Native Language versus National Language Literacy: Choices and Dilemmas in School Instruction Medium

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INTRODUCTION

While studies continue to show the advantages of educating children in their mother tongue---both for their later acquisition and transference of reading skills to other languages, and for their total gain from educational input---the mother tongue as medium of instruction still meets with resistance from many of the very participants who might profit by it. From remote African villages to Australian aboriginal communities, from South or Southeast Asian settings to the Peruvian Andes, examples can be found where the concepts of empowerment and usefulness---as perceived by hopeful parents---prevail over other considerations. At the same time, the notion of national unity through a single official language is defended by policy makers, who point out the practical and financial drawbacks involved in teaching in the vernacular in multilingual nations.

CS 013 000

This paper adds to the ongoing examination of variables and the debate over whether literacy acquisition in multicultural societies should be provided in the native tongue of the children in the classrooms. The findings from numerous grassroots-level case studies made by the author (e.g. Senegal, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Malawi, northern Thailand, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka) are presented as a source of participants' perceptions and desires. Additional comparative data from other countries are brought in to attest to the complexity of the debate, and to underscore the recurring themes of usefulness and social advancement on the one hand, and national unity and progress on the other.

OPPOSING DIRECTIONS IN TWO CASE STUDIES

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A. Senegal

You have to go to school in French. If you learn in Mandinka or Peul, you're not educated.

Mandinka village father, 1989

The opposing directions taken by two communities highlight the multidimensional issue of the language of literacy. Senegal is a country which made a thorough copy of the French educational system by 1946---its structure, content and diplomas---but education in the nation's early days remained very elitist. The instruction medium has always been French; and the intention to remain with the French medium was officially confirmed in 1971, although some experiments continue to be carried out in teaching the first two grades in Wolof. 1

Netteboulou, a remote village of the Mandinka tribe and the Muslim religion, located in the south-central part of Senegal, prides itself that it was one of the relatively few remote locations to receive a government school as early as 1933. The school has six grades and averages around 200 pupils (about two-thirds boys, one-third girls). At the time of the case study the six teachers were all males who came from other areas of the country and belonged to ethnic groups with different native languages, none of them Mandinka. They shared a close camaraderie in the French language, socially isolated from the village.

The Mandinka children enter first grade with no knowledge of French. They get little reinforcement from other classmates, because the students all cope with the same dilemma. High absenteeism due to the children's farming obligations aggravates the slow progress in language. Materials other than the blackboard and the tattered textbooks, often in short supply, are absent. The principal, who teaches the first two grades, admits that the process of teaching French in order that other class subjects can also be instructed, is tedious. Poor achievement by students after all six years of elementary school attests to the difficulties: it is a rare child who is able to pass the matriculation exam after 6th grade and continue on to study in high school.

As part of my study I asked the eleven best students from the fifth and sixth grades to write a short essay on what they wanted for their future. While the content of the essays was insightful of their communal culture (most desired a job in order to provide for their families), the low level of ability to express oneself in French, and the poor vocabulary and grammar, were indicative of the dilemmas of instruction in a foreign language when little reinforcement is available. It should also be noted that many of these participants had repeated grades and were much older than average fifth and sixth graders.

The difficulty I had in getting a local interpreter in spite of the long-term presence of the school, was just one more indicator of the school's failure to teach the French language. The sprinkling of villagers who could converse fairly well in French were the old-timers who had worked as colonial employees, had served in the military, had worked sporadically in France as migrant laborers, or those with considerable informal experience in business and commerce.

All of the thirty-two parents in the sample (16 males, 16 females) were asked in an interview if they prefer the official (2) language (French) as medium of school instruction, or would they prefer another option: either Wolof, or instruction in the vernacular, Mandinka. By far the largest number thought that education should be in French (81%). Of these, eleven said spontaneously that once you have learned French, one's own maternal language would be easy to learn to read later. A few noted that Mandinka was not a literate language and there should be no concern with teaching it in school. Some of the comments referred to the fact that French was the language of the wider world: "Mandinka won't take you far;" or "Mandinka only concerns our little area, it's too narrow." A couple of others mentioned that the Senegalese were still in collaboration with the French and must therefore understand them.

There were three people who preferred the medium of instruction to be the children's mother tongue: two women and the male health worker of the village, the latter stating that learning French was an unrealistic expectation for the young children. One of the women stated that there were no jobs available for them, thus it was useless to learn French. Another three respondents, all women, said that both the official language and the native language were equally

important. Two felt the school should start with French, and the other preferred the two languages be taught together. One male respondent noted that Arabic and French are equally important: "But while the returns for French come in this world, the returns for Arabic come after death." The village does have a Koranic school, taught by a volunteer elder. Most village children attend (after the French school hours) long enough to learn to recite important Muslim prayers. Only a few boys persist in private lessons long enough to be literate in Arabic.

The six teachers, too, were each asked their views on the language of instruction. All but one preferred French, while admitting the difficulties it presented for teachers and learners. The one exception stressed that it is better for the child's general education that instruction be given in the mother tongue. The others noted that there were difficulties in the beginning, but learning French was better in the long run. One said that the different sounds and vowels would make it too hard to transcribe the diverse vernaculars and too difficult to switch from reading one to the other. Another pointed out the advantage of having a common language for national unity.

Today, with a literacy rate of 28.6% (males 38.8%, females 19.4%; 1988) and with 62.6% of the population aged 6--34 years having had no formal schooling, it cannot be said that the present system is functioning toward achieving its goals. There is tremendous wastage through high dropout due to language incompetence. French remains the language of the elite, and the masses partake but sparingly of its fruits while clinging to a dream of equality. However, keeping the road to empowerment open by insisting on education in the official language is not surprising in a country where opportunities for bettering one's life are minimal.

B. Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a country which took an entirely different path with regard to school instruction medium. Under the British rule in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) there was a dual Educational system: English-medium, fee-levying schools for the elite, who received a good quality education; and vernacular-medium schools for the masses, which led to low-level employment and few options for high education. The reforms of 1931 eventually led to the overthrow of English as medium of instruction. By 1953--1958 there was a gradual grade-by-grade phase-out of English. In the Sinhalese (about 75%) and the Tamil (about 25%) vernacular schools, English was supposedly introduced as a compulsory subject for students above grade three. Then, as now, offering English was a kind of deception, for many schools never had an English teacher or at best an under qualified one. Knowing English continued to be important for good jobs or further study. And it was still the child from the relatively prosperous home who was in a position to gain a good knowledge of English.

Gradually the Tamil minority, who had occupied many prestigious government positions prior to independence from British colonial rule in 1948, found themselves excluded. The Sinhalese majority reserved economic and political advantages for themselves. The demise of English as a unifying language may have contributed to what has now become a perpetual hotbed of ethnic violence, with Tamil terrorist factions fighting for a separatist state.

When I went to do research in the remote southeastern village of Suduwatura Ara in 1984 and again in 1994, there was no English teacher. My volunteering to teach the school class for the third through fifth grade children and a non formal class in the weekends for all interested adults was met with enthusiasm. As curiosity wore off, however, the students' enthusiasm also waned. The practical use of English in a remote Sri Lankan rural setting is virtually nil, and the difficulty posed by very different alphabets is discouraging. Most parents say it is important that their school have an English teacher, as English is in the national curriculum from the third grade upward; but they realistically consider literacy in their mother tongue and a solid foundation in other subjects more important than English.

A high proportion of the villagers are literate in Sinhalese in this country with 86% literacy. There are enough newspapers, books, signs, instructions on bottles, etc. to make literacy in the vernacular a practical advantage, while the functional benefits of English are far removed from the real world of the village.

This is not the case in the urban centers, where knowing English is a decided advantage in government and business. The students I taught in the M.A. program in sociology at the University of Colombo had difficulty with English because their schooling had been in the vernacular. Writing papers and reading scientific articles in English were extremely challenging activities for them. Those from elite families that spoke English in the home and sent their children to private schools were at a definite advantage.

Senegal and Sri Lanka, when juxtaposed, form an interesting comparison with respect to their attitudes toward language instruction medium. The former still grasps the language of colonial domination, arguing that it will provide more opportunity, equality, and advancement for the nation. The latter chose for the vernacular long ago to rid itself of the inequalities brought on by colonial domination---only to find, after the country's achieving a high literacy rate and school enrollment (84% of 5--14 year olds), that the exclusiveness of English-language literacy has helped foster a smaller and more powerful core of advantaged elite. Some feel that the duality of having either Sinhalese or Tamil medium schools has also exacerbated the devastating civil strife and rivalry in Sri Lanka today. Both Senegal and Sri Lanka remain among the economically poor countries of the world.

COMPARATIVE VILLAGE CASE STUDIES IN MULTILINGUAL DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In the past decade I have visited schools around the world, many of them in disadvantaged rural areas of developing countries. This section provides a very brief overview of field research findings from selected multilingual countries which are coping with the problem of language instruction medium. In what language should the children first become literate? What do the teachers and parents see as most advantageous for the children in that particular culture with their own specific circumstances? What are important factors for taking a stand?

A. The Livingstonia Primary School, Malawi

This poor rural school suffers from a multitude of constraints, many of them material shortages. For example, there are ninety-seven children in the third grade classroom, all seated on the floor, sharing books. The inhabitants of this district (Rumphi) in northern Malawi speak Tumbuka as their native language. The official language of Malawi, however, is English, with Chichewa as the national language; and these latter two languages are the ones taught at school. Even in the first grade, children are taught in Chichewa, with additional English lessons---thus they must learn two "foreign" languages. Learning Chichewa is not as difficult for these Tumbuka children as learning English, for Chichewa and Tumbuka are both Bantu languages with many common words and similar grammar and syntax.

The teachers and the parents realize that the children must know the country's dominant tribal language in order to successfully compete for the few available jobs, to have an opportunity to continue their education, and to read the written word in their country. The Tumbuka tribe has traditionally shown a great respect for learning, an attitude reinforced by the local Presbyterian missionaries. Despite the problems caused by poverty, the Livingstonia Primary was fourth in Rumphi District in the number of pupils who passed the state matriculation examination at the end of grade eight, enabling them to continue their studies in secondary school.

In this case the villagers tackled the literacy problem head-on. Together with a dedicated school principal and teachers, they have adapted to the system. They are resourcefully solving poverty constraints through community participation; for example, the parents built the school latrines and teachers' quarters; the give the teachers extra kerosene so the latter can provide additional tutoring for state examinations during evening hours. The children appear to be gaining needed literacy in a non-native language. While they would like to be literate in Tumbuka, they see the greater prestige and utility of the dominant language.

B. The Pokuo Elementary School, Ethiopia

For a remote and nearly inaccessible village school in one of the most underdeveloped areas of Ethiopia, the Pokuo School can consider itself lucky. It has been loosely affiliated with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and its Mission since 1963. It was the mission that provided the building thirty years ago as well as some desks and other school supplies at

that time. Today the teachers' salaries are still paid through the mission, but that is one of the last U.S. connections. The six teachers, all from Amharic areas many hours away by bus, are "willing" to put up with hardships because of the higher salary they earn from the U.S. mission.

Language is a great problem at the school, as admitted by the teachers, who are all native Amharic speakers. Amharic is the dominant language of the country and the medium of instruction for the first eight grades. (High school courses in Ethiopia, grades 9--12, are supposed to be conducted in English.) All of the children in this village speak Anuak at home. The remoteness of the location means that the villagers have not been exposed to much Amharic; and none of the teachers speak Anuak. They remain isolated in their own compound and make very few efforts to integrate into the community or gain some proficiency in the native village language.

The language handicap of the children is frustrated by the requirement of a half hour of English daily in grades 1--4, and an hour daily for grades 5--6. The difficulties are intensified because Amharic and English have different alphabets. It is not surprising that the children can rarely speak more than a few words of English; even their teacher is not proficient enough to have an interview with ease. The English class was difficult to identify as such, for no English was heard---neither from the teacher nor the pupils.

The teachers, who were very well dressed and of the Amharic racial stock, stood out conspicuously in this rural Anuak village. Any commitment to the school---as might be seen in special activities, an active parent-teacher association, or anything beyond the minimal teaching requirements---was lacking. The parents would prefer that their children learn to read in their own language, from native Anuak teachers, and then learn English, for they feel an antagonism with the Amharic teachers. The lack of communication, literally and figuratively, is symbolic for the poor results of Ethiopia's efforts toward increasing literacy.

C. The Mutasa Primary School, Zimbabwe

This school in Zimbabwe's eastern highlands is in many ways representative for the progress made in the field of primary education in Zimbabwe since the country's independence in 1980. A sign at the gate welcomes the visitor; on the other side of the gate is a large painted mural of children on their way to school. Written in large letters in the Shona language are the words: "Education is life, everlasting light."

The Mutasa School demonstrates the country's traditional high regard for education---not only through the dedication of its teachers, but also through the cooperation and input of community members. Although the medium of instruction in Zimbabwe's education system is English, in rural areas the first several grades of primary school may be given in one of the major native languages (Shona or Ndebele); at least one of the native languages continues to be taught through each successive year of school.

At this school the first three grades are taught in Shona, with a gradual introduction of English. The parents are satisfied with this arrangement, recognizing English as the language of power and opportunity, but seeing that it is easier for their young children to first become literate in their mother tongue. This is especially true because the alphabet (Latin letters) is the same for English and Shona. It should be mentioned that considerable printed material is available in the Shona language, so its usefulness is readily apparent.

The teachers are all Shona tribespeople and enjoy their work. The school and the community cooperate in overcoming material constraints. For example, the parents helped the school start a chicken coop project on the school premises, the proceeds of which go to the school. The community also worked together to get a drinking water tap at the school and to maintain a school garden. The Mutasa school is representative for many others in Zimbabwe. With a jump in primary school enrollment since independence, and a literacy rate of seventy-six percent, this country has the best official record on the African continent.

D. The Ban Palei Primary School, northern Thailand

The tiny school of Ban Palei serves a Karen tribal village of refugee settlers and their descendants in northern Thailand. Not only Karen tribal children, but others from neighboring villages of Lisu and Akha tribal peoples also attend. None of the villagers are Thai citizens with full rights, thus the political climate for extending education in native tribal languages is adverse to say the least. Despite their lack of citizenship rights, the schoolchildren start the day by raising the Thai flag and singing the national anthem.

The building is a very modest thatch-roofed bamboo structure put up by the community. Its form is a long hall but the parents added two bamboo partitions, giving the school three separate rooms. They also built the furniture consisting of rows of boards nailed to logs which were sunk into the earthen floor, making the seating arrangement permanent.

The two male teachers use very formalistic methods: repetition, recitation, and copying exercises. The fact that there are only two teachers but three rooms of classes means that at least one class is usually left unsupervised. Here a lot of socializing and informal learning goes on. More children attend school than are officially enrolled (pre-schoolers are allowed to go along with their older siblings), which indicates that school is a place where the children like to be.

The teachers consider it their duty as Thai citizens to help educate the people living within the country's borders; however, they are looking forward to a transfer back to a less primitive setting. Thai is not the native language of the village children, but it is the medium of instruction. The teachers do not speak any of the three tribal languages of their pupils (Karen of the Karenic linguistic group; and Lisu and Akha of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group). They report that after the second grade the children can get along fairly well in Thai, as they hear it reinforced around them from many sources. The parents are satisfied that school instruction is in Thai; they see that it is important that their children learn the dominant language in order to have more opportunities in the guest country. A few expressed a desire that their children may one day become teachers, so the village can then have some of their own tribespeople as role models in the school.

E. The Kuta Community School, Papua New Guinea

This village school in the New Guinea highlands reflects another example of close school-community cooperation. The parents built and now maintain three teachers' houses, an additional room for the first grade when the main school building became too small, and school latrines. The village children speak the Tembaka language, one of 869 recognized languages in Papua New Guinea. The headmaster speaks Melpa, a language closely related to Tembaka, but the other four male teachers come from different areas and have different native tongues.

In the Kuta School and in schools all over the country, the medium of instruction is English, even though the constitutional mandate at the beginning of Papua New Guinea's independence (1975) called for universal literacy in local languages. The headmaster is in favor of English as the medium of instruction, saying, "Our language has no word for many things; English is better for schooling." The teachers agreed that their task was made easier because most of the children were already conversant in Tok Pisin (pidgin), one of the three national languages of the country (along with English and Hiri Motu). Only the youngest of the five teachers considered it preferable for the children to learn to read and write first in their native language. He said it would make learning to read more natural for the children and would help them preserve their cultural values. The teachers were aware that experiments in starting the first grade in the local language of the village were going on in various places in the country. In fact these experiments, sponsored by the National Department of Education's Language and Literacy Policy (1989), are the first attempts to act on the nation's constitutional mandate; but the budgetary constraints mean that widespread implementation is "encouraged" but not given necessary financial support (Ahai and Faraclas 1993:90).

The parents and children in Kuta are satisfied with the English Only Policy, as they live close enough to a sizable hub town, Mt. Hagen, where knowledge of English and Tok Pisin is useful for them.

TWO ISSUES FROM STUDIES OF INSTRUCTION MEDIUM IN ADDITIONAL COUNTRIES

A. Literacy, empowerment and utility

In Peru, as in Senegal, Sri Lanka and other developing countries, free education is seen as a way to escape a situation of dominance or exploitation. The Quechua language of Peru is associated with oppression. In the Peruvian areas studied by Hornberger, language instruction has traditionally been in Spanish; the children arrive at school speaking only Quechua, are sent at great expense and sacrifice by the parents, and still the dropout and illiteracy rates remain high (Hornberger 1980:148). The community members regard school as a means for their children to learn Spanish and penetrate into the non-ayllu domain---the larger, national, Peruvian society, while the ayllu or traditional domain is the one associated with their native Quechua language. As long as the primary reward systems of the larger society do not promote use of Quechua (e.g. no one now is given job preference for knowing Quechua or both Spanish and Quechua), the Quechua speakers will want to maintain the school as a Spanish element in the community---even though learning Quechua first might help them learn Spanish (Hornberger 1980:151-156). This is the same line of thinking found in the Senegal villages.

It is interesting to note a similar situation where language was associated with particular sociocultural domains. Ralph Folds analyzed the introduction of a bilingual program in the central Australian Pitjantjatjara communities, which had no regard for the socio-linguistic domains associated with Aboriginal and "whitefella" business. Here the bilingual program was a failure, for it represented a "paternalistic, imposed attempt to preserve indigenous culture" (Folds 1989:44). The Pitjantjatjara experiment degraded the vernacular by using corrupted versions of it and allowing teachers incompetent in that language to teach it. The Aboriginal communities consistently expressed strong feelings about the need for their children to learn English, to be educated in English---while competency in English is better realized after a foundation of literacy in the indigenous language (Folds 1989:48). Folds concludes that bilingual models need to be judged by their potential to empower Aboriginal communities in their present circumstances (1989:49). As the Pitjantjatjara community did not perceive the bilingual model offered to be useful for them, or even to be a way of preserving their identity and dignity, the experiment was a failure.

The above examples from Peru and Australia illustrate that speakers of the non-dominant language, although they may consciously want to maintain their language and cultural identity, are sensitive to their languages being taught outside their perceived appropriate domain. This presents an anomaly and gives the suspicion that their narrow path toward empowerment might be cut off. As in Senegal, they are even willing to reject education in their native tongue as a curiosity and deny that their language is a literate one.

While diverse studies continue to show that formal training in the mother tongue is an important factor in the development of general language proficiency and successful, functional literacy, there are just as many studies which uphold the case against bilingual education (Stewart 1993:148-154). The mother-tongue proficiency concept may be hard to sell in countries where literacy in the native tongue has very limited use in the modern economy, or in instances where the alphabet of the two languages is greatly different. The success of the Foyer Project in Belgium points strongly toward the need for formal mother-tongue training, confirming Cummins' "interdependence principle" that native language literacy is a prerequisite for global language proficiency. Danesi emphasizes the devotion of the teachers involved in the Foyer Project, their commitment to the educational achievement of the children and their support of mother-tongue training in the curriculum (1988:439-452). Such dedicated teachers will undoubtedly be hard to find in many minority-language locales, where native speakers themselves were handicapped by the dominant society and were less able to pursue an education to become a teacher. The most important variable continues to be: the usefulness that the literate language will have in the lives of the learners---as measured in advantages on the job market and available material to be read in that language.

B. Literacy and unification.

The example of the Kuta Community School of Papua New Guinea in an earlier section brought up the point that a large gap may exist between what the national government propounds as ideal---here the philosophy of "Integral Human Development"---and what the practical outcome turns out to be (Ahai and Faraclas 1993:8). Despite the 1975

constitutional mandate for universal literacy in local languages, twenty years later it is still the "English Only Policy" which has been enforced and supported, with the country's "debt crisis" used as an excuse for not implementing the original goal. Ahai and Faraclas (1993:100) attribute the inactivity to neocolonialist political tendencies and what they call the "technicist" approach to literacy.

Many examples from the literature can be found where a compromise solution has been sought. Although linguistic pluralism in contemporary nations is the norm rather than the exception, the tendency seems to be to encourage more integration so that distinct groups do not become increasingly different and unintelligible (Bray 1984:65).

In Nigeria, for example, the need for compromise as well as the need for national unity can be clearly seen. In the colonial era the primary pupils learned in the vernacular the first few years before changing to English; then after independence English was introduced right from Class I. This policy was changed back in the mid-70s, when English was taught as a subject in the first grades but was the medium of instruction in Class IV. Many practical problems remain. Instruction cannot be provided in all of Nigerias's 395 languages, and which one to use in multilingual areas remains a question. Some children are forced to learn in a "foreign language" in their first school years and change to another one (English) later on (Bray 1984:240), as was the case for the Tumbuka children at the school in Malawi mentioned earlier. Bray notes that "progress up the educational ladder is still dependent on a good command of English," and children in those schools and states in Nigeria where English is taught from the beginning have an advantage over others (1984:240).

A study of five West African countries showed diverse models, none without pitfalls. On the extreme side of integration of national languages as medium of instruction we find Guinea, whose cultural socialist revolution required instruction in primary as well as secondary schools to be given in its eight national languages. A myriad of problems was encountered (including those of diverse phonetics and alphabets, books, and getting qualified teachers); and there was much resistance given by intellectuals. The conclusion of Fal's study mentioned that education in the native tongue will only be seen as successful if it leads to practical and positive ends: reading newspapers and books that are made available, and securing gainful employment (Fal 1981:205)---thus the themes of usefulness and empowerment again enter the picture.

Examples can be found in other multilingual corners of the world. Brock points out for the Caribbean (1984:161) that language is a cultural index of great significance for education. In general, creole and patois, the native languages, are encouraged by socialist administrations, while conservative regimes prefer to maintain English as instruction medium. The professional middle classes discourage their children from using non-standard English or patois. Brock maintains that the choice of first and second languages in the schools will be made on political grounds (1984:184-186), additional evidence of the top-down process.

Finally, interesting comparative material is found in Southeast Asia, where a broad collection of multicultural and multilingual societies exists and where all the governments have been deliberate in their desire to use their education systems to foster a sense of national unity in the populations. Watson presents a survey of Indonesia, Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, with different combinations of major languages and national languages, and diverse language policies in education. For example, Indonesia, with three major languages and Bahasa Indonesia as national language, uses the vernacular until grade 3 and thereafter the national language, while putting forth a policy of assimilation (1984:215-216). Watson points out that educational policies differ considerably according to the position perceived by the dominant elite. It is also concluded that the use of a national language to create a sense of national identity can have quite different outcomes. In Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, national language policies have been largely successful; in Singapore, the national language was bypassed for educational purposes. English, the language of science and commerce, was taken as the educational language. For all, it was necessary to tread the sensitive balance between different ethnic groups in their respective countries (Watson 1984:231). Thus, not only national unity, but also economic incentives were the motivating factors for decisions regarding language instruction.

Interestingly, Singapore, after successfully promoting English as the language of technology and international commerce, is now (a decade later) lamenting the fact that it may have overshot its mark. The Singapore government is concerned about the declining literacy rate in its native languages (Kwan-Terry and Kwan Terry 1993:158). The New Education System incorporates students' ethnic languages as a major part of the curriculum for all except the weakest students, who only need literacy in English. The government is now particularly determined to preserve the majority language, Mandarin Chinese, and Chinese cultural values. Ironically, at this point the Chinese themselves see this as a

burden for their children, who are already under great competitive pressure in a meritocratic society. Being literate in Chinese has few material benefits in Singapore (Kwan-Terry and Kwan-Terry 1993:158). Thus the top-down perspective has taken an interesting turn---from interest in material progress to interest in cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasizes---through fieldwork data and a literature survey--- that there is not a simple or single solution which can be applied across the board with regard to language instruction medium for literacy. A colossal gap exists between what the theorists proclaim as ideal, and the real-life empirical world of schools in very poor multilingual countries. That is to say, the ideal of teaching in the mother tongue in order to enhance global language proficiency and preserve native cultural values, must take into account that there are numerous practical problems to be dealt with and many sources of resistance. The practical problems can be readily enumerated: those of alphabet, transcriptions, phonetics, paucity of vocabulary, lack of resources for programs and trained teachers, and a shortage of textbooks and other printed matter in the new literate languages.

While such practical problems are not to be scoffed at, the problems of resistance at different levels are more significant. The governments may fear isolation and decreasing national unity if native tongues are reinforced through primary literacy. Additionally, they tend to opt for, and invest funds in, languages which are perceived to boost the nation's technological advancement. When choices are made between a majority native language and a minority one, the latter will be compromised.

The diverse case studies tend to show that parents and pupils are satisfied with school instruction medium being in a dominant language if they see that dominant language as a possible vehicle for social advancement. The success of instruction in a non-native language depends on the degree to which the learners have an opportunity to be involved with that language in the real world---both in its spoken and written forms. The children in the isolated Mandinka village in Senegal have little contact with French, and the village villagers lose their literacy skills. This is also the case in the Ethiopian Anuak village, where the children have few chances to use either Amharic or English.

The Malawi minority-language village, the Thailand hill tribe village, and the Papua New Guinea village cases fall in a different category. The dominant non-native languages they learn in school are frequently reinforced in their daily lives. These languages have meaning for them. To try to replace them with native languages as instruction medium would displease the parents, who want their children to have a competitive chance to use their education on the job market.

The Zimbabwe model seems to work for many rural schools: basic literacy in the first three grades in the native language, especially if the language is one which is useful, i.e. if there is printed reading material available and if the written language is reinforced in other places in the child's environment. It is also important for easy transference that the native and the dominant languages have the same alphabet.

When the numerous variables and viewpoints are considered, USEFULNESS emerges as the most important factor in predicting whether a choice of literacy instruction medium will be successful. The perception of the usefulness may be different, however: useful for national unity and technological progress, as seen from a top-down perspective; or useful for reading and writing in one's daily life and for job opportunities, as seen from a bottom-up perspective. In general, to have literacy in the native tongue be judged as truly useful by minority language speakers, the appropriate reading material, inside and outside the school, must be available. This is a big order and a slow process. But so was the move from Latin as the literate language in the sixteenth century to widespread use of the diverse vernaculars. Some minority languages will inevitably become victims of linguicide, as the advance of electronic media gives more advantages to those who are literate in dominant languages. Each nation will suffer its growing pains in choosing among the many imperfect models with regard to instruction medium for literacy in multilingual societies.

NOTES:

1. Wolof is spoken by more than half the population and considered a sort of lingua franca in Senegal. Back

2. Some confusion exists in the literature regarding the terms 'national' and 'official' language. Many West African nations use 'official' language to refer to the language of the ex-colonial mother countries, e.g. French or English, the language used officially by the government; while 'national' language refers to the vernacular or native language (mother tongue, maternal language, etc.). In the literature on Southeast Asian countries, 'national' language refers to the language used by the government (Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Thai, Tagalog, etc.); these are not necessarily major spoken languages in the country, nor do they necessarily have anything to do with the ex-colonial mother countries. Back

3. The above paper, which was originally presented at the World Conference on Literacy, Philadelphia, March 12-15, 1996, was selected for inclusion in a forthcoming edited volume on literacy. A similar version under the title of "Literacy in Developing Societies: Native Language versus National Language Literacy" will appear in Acquisition of Literacy in Two Languages, edited by Aydin Durgunoglu and Ludo Verhoeven, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1997.

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